

# **CLEAR RUN PLANTATION**

## **Introduction**

Clear Run Plantation was formerly a trading center and river landing located on the banks of the Black River in the community of Clear Run in southern Sampson County, North Carolina. Clear Run Plantation was nominated for and listed on the National Register in 1985 (Butchko 1985). The plantation currently encompasses approximately 1,440 acres of land. The National Register boundaries are shown in Figure 2. Clear Run is an intact rural crossroads having major importance in North Carolina's history.

## **The Herring Family of Clear Run**

John Herring, Jr., originally owned the land on which Clear Run Plantation is now situated. Herring's father, John Herring, came to Virginia in 1642 and died in Isle of Wight County in 1672. In the early eighteenth century, members of the Herring family moved to eastern North Carolina in the area of Albemarle and Bertie counties. John Herring, Jr., received the grant of lands at Clear Run on the Black River, on the border of New Hanover and Duplin counties, in 1754. Herring and his wife moved to Clear Run in 1754, bringing with them their adult children, John III, Richard, Sarah, and Martha. Richard Herring, John DeVane, and James White were commissioned by the Provincial Congress to establish a gun factory at Clear Run during the Revolutionary War. This factory produced a number of small arms before it was destroyed by the Tories. The Herring family continued to live at Clear Run until it was sold to Amos J. Johnson circa 1870 (Herring n.d.).

## **Clear Run Plantation**

Clear Run Plantation was founded by A. J. Johnson (1843-1914), a merchant and farmer from the Taylor's Bridge area of Sampson County. Around 1879, Johnson moved his mercantile and farming operation to Clear Run, expanding to include naval stores production and a steamboat operation (Butchko 1985). Johnson was a prominent merchant and industrialist in Sampson County who owned 1,700 acres of land, on which were situated a turpentine distillery, a general store, a furniture store, a cotton gin, steamboats, a gristmill, and a blacksmith shop, as well as agricultural fields. In addition, he served as postmaster at Clear Run, a county commissioner, justice of the County Court, and a director of the Bank of Clinton (Butchko 1985). He also owned a sawmill (Anglely 1983).

There are 28 structures, or locations of structures, remaining on the Clear Run property that contribute to the plantation's significance (Figure 3). These include three major residences, five commercial buildings, two tenant houses, and 18 agricultural/industrial buildings (Butchko 1985). In addition to the architectural remains, there are also two cemeteries and the sunken remains of the turn-of-the-century steamer *A. J. Johnson*.

The major house on the plantation is the Marvin Johnson House, built ca. 1898. A. J. Johnson had this house built for his son Marvin at the time of his marriage. The other domestic structures on the site include the A. J. Johnson House, built for Amos J. Johnson in 1909 when he and his wife left Taylor's Bridge and moved to Clear Run. The third structure is the Herring House, a ca. 1830 Federal style house, which was originally located one-third mile from Clear Run and was moved to its current site in 1980 (Butchko 1985).

The commercial buildings located at Clear Run include the furniture store (ca. 1860), the grocery-general store (ca. 1900), the cotton gin (late nineteenth century), the former turpentine still (late nineteenth to early twentieth century), and the former blacksmith-cooper shop (late nineteenth to early twentieth century) (Butchko 1985). The furniture store, which was originally the Clear Run general store, was moved to its present location in 1870 from Taylor's Bridge, when A. J. Johnson moved his mercantile operation to Clear Run. The cotton gin, which dates to the late nineteenth century, was in operation until the 1940s. It has since been abandoned but the original machinery is still intact. The grocery-general store was built ca. 1900 and remained in operation until 1967. There are no standing architectural remains for the turpentine still and blacksmith-cooper shop; however, their locations are documented. Both the still and the shop date to the late nineteenth to early twentieth century (Butchko 1985). The current investigations focused on the site of the blacksmith-cooper shop.

The building that contained the blacksmith shop was still standing 40 or 50 years ago, according to local informants, and during its last years of existence was a place where moonshine whiskey was made and sold. The blacksmith-cooper shop was in use during the height of Clear Run's trading and commercial activities.

There are 18 buildings and sites associated with the agricultural and industrial activities that took place at Clear Run. These include two tenant houses, one dating to the mid- to late nineteenth century and the other dating to the early twentieth century. In addition to the tenant houses, there are three smokehouses, two barns, a brick flowerpit, an early to mid-twentieth-century pump house, a grape arbor, a ca. 1835 tractor shed, an early twentieth-century garage, a ca. 1950 barbecue shed, three new metal silos, a mid-twentieth-century hog shed, three tobacco barns, a modern shed, the remains of tar/pitch beds, and a former warehouse (Butchko 1985). There is also an insignificant animal pen located on the property.

In addition to the standing architecture at Clear Run, the remains of the sunken steamboat *A. J. Johnson* are located along the northwest bank of the Black River and are visible when the water is low. The *A. J. Johnson* was built at Clear Run in 1899 and was in operation from 1900 to 1914. The steamer was the last regularly scheduled steamer in use on the Black River. The ship sank at her mooring during a violent storm in 1914 (Butchko 1985).

There are also two cemeteries associated with the Johnson family located within the limits of the plantation. The first is surrounded by a metal (probably iron) fence and

contains two graves. These are the graves of Nathan R. Johnson (1857-1891) and Ben C. Barden (1867-1888). The second cemetery, delineated by a cypress fence, contains the graves of Amos J. Johnson (1843 –1914), Emily I. Johnson (1849-1910), Elizabeth Johnson (1807-1877), Amos Johnson (1801-1871), and Annie D., wife of M. W. Johnson (1882-1905) (Butchko 1985).

In sum, Clear Run Plantation National Register Historic Site is a well-preserved grouping of agricultural and commercial buildings clustered around the primary residence, the ca. 1898 Marvin Johnson House. Clear Run was an important crossroads community that was established during a period when riverboats and riverboat landings were an important part of the trade network in the lower Cape Fear River basin (Butchko 1985). Clear Run is the last of these communities to survive. A. J. Johnson, the founder of Clear Run, was a prominent businessman, and his steamer, the *A. J. Johnson*, was the last in service on the Black River. At A. J. Johnson's death in 1914, his widow, Lula Merritt Johnson (1872-1962), inherited the farm. Marvin Johnson sold his house to neighbor C. I. Robinson about 1915. A. J. Johnson's daughter, Elizabeth Johnson McLamb, bought the Marvin Johnson house in 1943 and moved to Clear Run with her husband (Butchko 1985). Their son, Amos J. McLamb, is the current owner of the farm and resides in the 1909 A. J. Johnson house.